November 6, 2003 -- It's one of the most serious breaches of trust on one of the most sensitive committees on Capitol Hill. It's a memo, drafted by Democratic staffers on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, that clearly details the manner in which Democrats hoped to manipulate privileged information regarding pre-Iraq-War intelligence to explicit partisan advantage.

Goal: To embarrass President Bush and the administration.

And to hell with the War on Terror.

The memo, first reported on the Fox News Channel, suggests that Democrat members "pull the [Republican] majority along as far as we can on issues that may lead to major new disclosures regarding improper or questionable conduct by administration officials.

"We can pull the trigger on an independent investigation of the administration's use of intelligence at any time. But we can only do so once. The best time to do so will probably be next year."

That is, right in the middle of a presidential election.

Until then, the memo continues, "We can verbally mention some of the intriguing leads we are pursuing."

Translation: We can leak like sieves all over our pet reporters!

Politics as usual?

Everybody does it?

Hell, no.

For one thing, there's a war on. Lives are at stake. American lives.

For another, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence is meant to be different.

It rarely holds open hearings. And regardless of which party is in the majority, the committee is meant to speak with one voice and - most important - to avoid politicizing critical security issues.

This is vitally important.

The legislative branch - Congress - has a constitutionally mandated oversight responsibility with respect to the executive branch - the White House.

However, the Founding Fathers could barely have foreseen the security and intelligence challenges of the last several decades.

Thus, the Select Committee is organized to facilitate Congress' oversight - without compromising national security.
But this arrangement can only work if there is trust between the two branches and within the committee.

Now that trust has been shattered.

Chairman Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) plainly has no reason to trust anything coming from the Democratic side.

Certainly not the weasel words coming from Vice-Chairman Jay Rockefeller (D-W. Va.).

The memo, he says, "reflects staff frustration with the conduct of the Senate Intelligence Committee investigation and the difficulties of obtaining information from the administration."

Really?

Here's what fellow Democrat Zell Miller of Georgia had to say:

"Of all the committees, this is the one single committee that should unquestionably be above partisan politics. The information it deals with should never, never be distorted, compromised or politicized . . . [f]or it involves the lives of our soldiers and our citizens.

"If what has happened here is not treason, it is its first cousin. The ones responsible - be they staff or elected or both - should be dealt with quickly and severely.

"Heads should roll."

Beginning with Rockefeller's.

He has clearly outlived his usefulness as vice-chairman of the committee.

The memo became public in the middle of sensitive negotiations with the White House over legitimate congressional requests for pre-war intelligence.

How can the Bush administration trust that material given over to Roberts and then to the Democrats on the committee won't be manipulated for partisan gain?

That is, how can Congress now exercise its constitutionally required oversight role on a matter of utmost national urgency?

Answer: It can't.

Whether Rockefeller approved the memo is immaterial - though it truly stretches credulity to assert otherwise.

The only way for trust to be restored is for the senator to step down - and for his successor to conduct a thorough, public house-cleaning of staff.

Immediately.